

Guatemala imposes state of siege against mine protests

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The Guatemalan government of President Otto Perez Molina has imposed a 30-day state of siege in four southeastern towns to repress protests against a Canadian-owned mining operation.

Some 3,500 heavily armed troops and police backed by tanks and armored cars mounted with anti-aircraft guns poured into the region at the end of last month, occupying the towns and setting up roadblocks to search anyone moving through the area. The state of siege suspends basic constitutional rights, barring public assembly and allowing the military to indefinitely detain anyone without charges or trials. It also lifts restrictions on searches and seizures.

Placed under military rule were the municipalities of Jalapa and Mataquescuintla in the department of Jalapa, and those of Casillas and San Rafael Las Flores in the department of Santa Rosa.

In announcing the state of siege on May 2, President Perez Molina, a former army general, claimed that the crackdown had nothing to do with the opposition to the mining operation, but rather was directed against “organized crime.”

“In these places they have committed murders, kidnapping and destruction of both state and private property,” said the president, adding that 15 arrests had already been carried out.

However, the reality is that the government is unleashing massive a repressive force to prevent the Guatemalan people from interfering in the profit-making activities of transnational corporations.

Popular unrest has steadily escalated in the region since the government signed a permit last month allowing the Canadian-based mining corporation, Tahoe Resources, Inc. to begin exploiting the Escobar silver mine near the town of San Rafael Las Flores, about 40 miles southeast of the capital of Guatemala

City.

Local residents, drawn largely from the Xinka indigenous population, are opposed to the mine, which they say will destroy the area’s water supply and ruin its environment.

On April 27, the company’s paramilitary security guards opened fire on protesters, wounding at least eight. Details of the confrontation are in sharp dispute. The company claimed that its goons attacked only after machete-wielding protesters tried to storm the gate. The groups opposed to the mine, however, called the onslaught unprovoked, saying it was launched against the protesters as they were marching down the road past the mine entrance.

Tahoe also claimed that the private security force used only “non-lethal” means—tear gas and rubber bullets—to suppress the protest. But the protesters reported that several people were struck with live ammunition.

A local resident told *Prensa Comunitaria* that the head of the mine’s security force “ordered the guards to shoot, saying that they were tired of this garbage, referring to our people; they insulted them and then loaded their shotguns and began to fire from inside.”

The security head, a Chilean by the name of Alberto Rotonda, was subsequently arrested by police at the airport while trying to flee the country.

In response, residents seized 23 police officers the next day, taking their weapons. When a large force of police was sent into the area to free them, one policeman and one peasant demonstrator were killed in the ensuing confrontation.

Critics of the government’s action have pointed out that other areas of the country have seen far more violence without the imposition of martial law, indicating that the real purpose is to protect the foreign

mining interests. Others have pointed out that Perez Molina has failed to seek the ratification of the state of siege by the Guatemalan parliament as required under the country's constitution.

Daniel Pascual, a representative of the Committee for Peasant Unity (Comité de Unidad Campesina—CUC) came to the area under military control over the weekend to monitor abuses of the local population. In a press conference, he called the state of siege “illegal” and “unnecessary.”

“We believe that if the state does not capture crime bosses or armed groups in these operations, the only thing that they are going to demonstrate is that they used the state of siege to benefit the mining companies and not to establish peace and tranquility in these territories,” Pascual said.

A statement by the Xinka People's Parliament charged that the Perez Molina government was using the state of siege to round up leaders of the indigenous population. “We fear for the lives of our leaders,” the statement said. “We are returning to the 1980s, with the persecution of leaders, extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances.”

The crackdown has coincided with the on-again, off-again trial of one of Guatemala's former military dictators from that period, Efraín Ríos Montt, and his intelligence chief José Rodríguez Sánchez on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. While the trial began in March, a judge intervened last month ordering the proceedings halted, claiming that judicial errors had not been corrected. The country's Constitutional Court lifted the order. It was halted again last week, however, pending a ruling on an injunction request filed by the former dictator's lawyer.

The trial has touched raw nerves within the country's ruling oligarchy. Washington-backed Ríos Montt and other dictators carried out a 36-year-long civil war in which some 200,000 Guatemalans were killed, the overwhelming majority of them indigenous peasants and workers and students, who were slaughtered by the military and its paramilitary supporters.

Ríos Montt and his co-defendant are charged specifically with a scorched earth campaign that saw the killing of 1,771 Ixil Mayan Indian men, women and children. These were only a fraction of the 80,000 people who were killed or disappeared during the Guatemalan general's 17 months in power.

Ríos Montt, a fundamentalist Christian, was a favorite ally of the Reagan administration during his brief and bloody reign.

Testimony has also implicated the current president, Perez Molina, who was a major in the Guatemalan special forces during Ríos Montt's regime, in ordering the looting and burning of villages and mass executions.

Last month, a group of former Guatemalan officials, many of whom enjoy close ties to Washington, took out a full-page ad in the capital's newspapers entitled “Betray Peace and Divide Guatemala.” The ad insisted that there had been no genocide in Guatemala—a position stated by Perez Molina himself—and warned that to continue making these charges could lead to a “sharpening of the social and political polarization that would reverse the peace achieved until now.”



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